

# 6. The Spread of Islam

One of the great cultural contact experiences in world history involved the spread of Islam, from its initial base in the Arabian peninsula and the Middle East to a host of areas in Africa, Asia, and Europe. Islam appealed to people in a variety of societies and cultures, bringing important changes as a result of contact while often in some respects merging with the established local belief systems.


Muslims compelled new cultural contacts from about 700 CE onward as a result of conquests, far-reaching trade, and, increasingly, missionary activity. The geographical dimensions of the Muslim world were pretty well established by 1450 CE—the end of the postclassical period—though a few key later chapters would be written in Africa, southern Asia, and southeastern Europe. Islam’s spread was gradual though amazingly rapid given the extensive geography and diverse regions involved.


Two primary patterns were involved. In some cases, Islam spread to other cultures

in a context of military conquest, even though the religion was tolerant of other beliefs. Muslims rarely forced people to convert to their religion, often preferring to levy a special tax on minority communities instead. The famous *jihād*, or holy war described by the prophet Muhammad, was mainly used for defense of the faith, not forced conversion, though there were exceptions. But the success of Muslim armies could create a context in which other people found it prudent to convert, or in which they were attracted to the religion simply because of its manifest power and triumph. In other instances, Islam spread through more spontaneous conversions as people learned of it through trade and missionary activity. The religion was clearly attractive, with an explicit set of beliefs about what to do and what not to do in order to win access to heaven and avoid a lamentable eternity in hell. It appealed to lower-class groups because of its commitment to charity and spiritual equality; it also legitimated merchant activity more than did most belief systems at the time, and so could attract traders. The

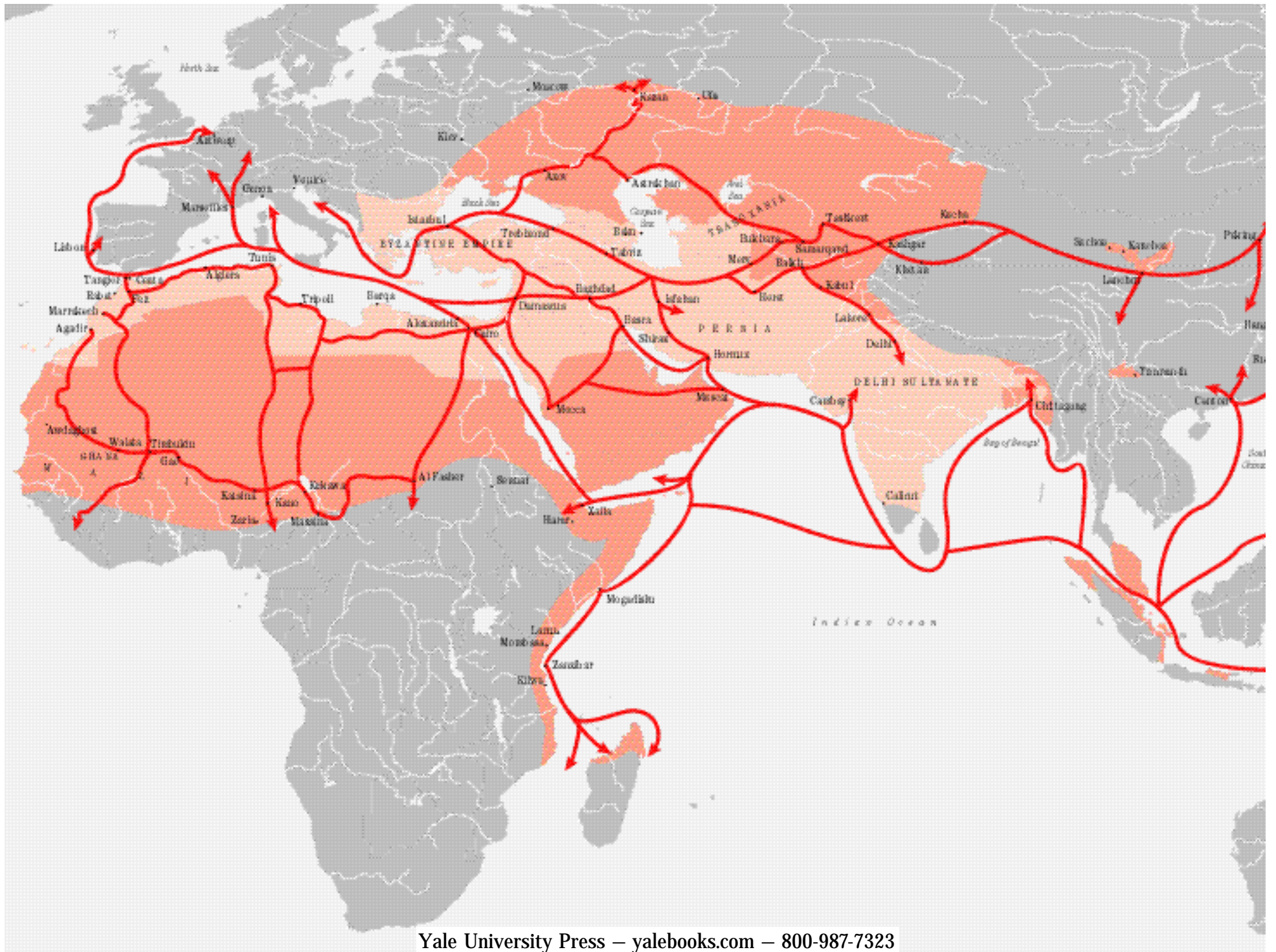
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## *Extent of the Islamic World by 1500 CE*

 *Lands conquered by Islamic military force*

 *Lands where Islam was spread by Sufi missionaries and traders*

 *Trade routes*



cultural and political achievements of Islam drew people eager to advance their societies in a variety of ways, including religious ones.

Believing that he was divinely inspired, the prophet Muhammad, born in about 570 CE, generated the basic tenets of the newest world religion. The context for Islam involved the surge of Arab peoples, originally a nomadic group on the fringes of Mediterranean civilization that became increasingly active in trade and formulated a well-established culture, including a writing system. The collapse of the Roman Empire had left a welter of small states in the eastern Mediterranean, along with a confusing mixture of religions, including Judaism and Christianity. Muhammad sought to reorganize Arab culture but also to offer a religion that would build on and perfect Jewish and Christian thinking. Islam was a rigorous monotheistic system, offering a clear statement of duties that would help assure salvation. The Qu'ran, the holy book that Muhammad composed under the inspiration of Allah, provided detailed regulations for many aspects of life, including family life. Muslim principles urged rulers to defend the religion above all, though their political goals were often unfulfilled; Islam came to depend on a mixture of state support and the activities of scholars and legal philosophers who interpreted doctrine and law on a local basis and administered a system of religious courts.

Islam had begun to spread rapidly among the Arabs by the time of Muhammad's death in 632 CE. This growth helped galvanize Arabs to a surge of conquest, and armies quickly spread through the Middle East, including Persia, though the Byzantine Empire long held out amid reduced Asian territory. North Africa was another early conquest. A loose central government, the caliphate, was established for this West Asian–North African heartland by Muhammad's successors; it lasted until the thirteenth century. Arabs for a time sought to reserve Islam for their people alone, while tolerating local religions; but many people in the conquered regions sought access, some of them adopting Arab language and culture in the process. Conquests by Muslim Arabs gradually turned into a more general spread of Islam in its Middle Eastern–North African heartland and beyond.

The Middle East had long been a center of trade with Asia, Africa, and Europe alike. Arab and Muslim gains spurred further efforts toward achieving additional wealth, which were aided by Islam's approval of merchant activity leavened by charity. Muslim traders spread well beyond the caliphate, and they left new cultural contacts in their wake.

Finally, changes in Islam itself galvanized even more active and extensive spiritual leadership. After about 900 CE a movement

called Sufism took hold. The movement emerged gradually and was fully defined only in about 1200 CE. Sufi leaders worried about the luxury and secular interests of the later caliphs, and also the diverse intellectual life that had developed as Islam interacted with Greek scientific heritage and various literary movements. They wanted a stricter focus on religion and a more intense piety. Interestingly, Sufi leaders, who initially flourished among outlying peoples like the Turks, borrowed some ideas from the Christian monastic movement and from Buddhism. Some Sufi leaders emphasized works of charity, but others offered a highly emotional religion complete with intense rituals. Characteristically, Sufi leaders sought to spread the beliefs of Islam to new regions. Their enthusiasm and the example of their holy devotion helped to persuade many people, as they showed how to bridge the gap between Allah and ordinary mortals.

From its base in the Middle East–North Africa, Islam gained adherents in several parts of southern Europe; in sub-Saharan Africa; in central Asia, including western China; in India; and in southeast Asia. The dates and patterns of growth varied in each case. In explaining how Islam caught on, a crucial variable involves the balance between conquest versus trade and spiritual example. Another division, when Islam spread mainly by persuasion, involves relationships between elites and masses of the

receiving areas. In some cases elites and ruling classes converted first, attracted by the religion but also by its praise for merchants and its political success; elites then disseminated the religion further. In other cases, conversion began among ordinary people, as when Sufi leaders interacted with peasant villages.

Inevitably, as Islam surged into areas of different traditional beliefs and styles, cultural amalgamations occurred. Some areas received the religion fully, including its associated artistic styles, such as the architecture of the mosques and the rich decoration of a religion that tried to forbid representations of people and animals. Other areas, however, accepted the religion but not some of the specifics concerning art or family life. A variety of patterns of syncretism, or cultural blending, occurred. Finally, some areas saw the development of an important Muslim minority along with resistance by the majority culture. Tracing the geography of Islam means exploring these various and important results.

## Islam and Europe

The rise of Islam created fear and hatred in Christian Europe, which quickly identified a powerful and indeed long superior rival. European crusades, called in the late

eleventh century, sought to win back the Holy Land from the Muslims, though they were only briefly successful. Hostility to Islam has remained a major theme in European history to the present day. For their part, Muslims often scorned European backwardness and crudeness, and when Europe became more powerful, they often pointedly avoided opportunities for imitation and interaction.

But significant contacts occurred. Muslims made two separate sweeps into Europe, the first of which created an important cultural fusion, vital to European and even American history later on, and the second of which created a durable pocket of Muslims still active today.

The Arab conquests in Spain followed from their rapid sweep through North Africa in the seventh century. Conquests of Spain were complete, save for a Christian remnant in the northeast, by 732 CE. Frankish armies defeated the Muslims in France, blocking further gains; and a brief hold over Sicily and other Italian islands was pushed back by Christian invaders. But the Muslim period in Spain and Portugal had vital consequences. Muslim rulers developed an elaborate political and cultural framework while largely tolerating Christian subjects. A number of Spaniards converted under the influence of conquest and Muslim success.

Muslim artistic styles long influenced Spanish architecture and decoration, even after Islam itself had been pushed out. Music, including the guitar, an Arab instrument, merged traditions as well—and from Spain the new styles would later spread to the Americas. Centers of learning, like Toledo, drew scholars from all over Europe, eager to take advantage of Muslim and Jewish science and philosophy; the result helped spur change and development in European intellectual life.

Amid all this fruitful interaction, Christian warriors from northern Spain mounted a steady counterattack, gradually winning back territory from the tenth century onward. The strength of Christianity and, ironically, limited trade opportunities in backward Europe prevented the spread of Muslim influence, and the retreat was inexorable, particularly as Arab political consolidation in the Middle East and Africa broke down, leaving the rulers in Spain isolated. In 1492 CE the last remaining pocket, in Granada, was expelled by the forces of the now-united Spanish monarchy of Ferdinand and Isabella.

At this very time, however, the second Muslim entry into Europe was occurring, in the Balkans. Ottoman Turks systematically conquered this region in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and ruled it for several cen-



### ***Islam in Spain and France (8th century CE)***

turies. Their dominance created a significant Muslim minority, though there were few forced conversions. Muslim immigration from the Middle East plus the activities of Sufi preachers brought many voluntary conversions—as did the higher tax on non-Muslims, particularly in Bosnia. By the mid-sixteenth century, Muslims formed about 20 percent of the population. But trade was limited, and commitments to Christianity remained strong. When the Ottoman Empire began to decline in the seventeenth century, gradually losing territory, the conversion process ceased. A large Muslim minority remained, however, amid frequent hostilities with Christian groups that broke out anew in the late twentieth century. Here, as usual, traditional cultures merged with Islam's influence, creating, for example, the distinctive Bulgarian choral and dance styles applied to Christian and folk themes.

### **Sub-Saharan Africa**

Islam reached Africa south of the Sahara in two ways. Important interactions occurred during the postclassical period, though only a minority of Africans converted (except in North Africa, which religiously merged with the Middle East). But the religious contacts were nonetheless important. They set the basis for much more extensive conversions from the late eighteenth century onward, when missionary efforts and religious wars

conducted by fervent Muslims began to spread the religion to ordinary people. By the late twentieth century about 40 percent of all sub-Saharan Africans were Muslim.

Initial contacts in West Africa focused on the Sudanic kingdoms, headed at first by Ghana. These contacts had some distinctive features. Trade with Muslim North Africa developed quickly, across the Sahara Desert by camel and horseback. The trade was vital to Ghana for tax revenues and supply of horses. The king of Ghana also hired Arab Muslims to keep records, because they had writing and bureaucratic experience. But contacts also facilitated raids by Muslims from the north, often encouraged by local Islamic groups.

The kingdom of Mali, which flourished after Ghana collapsed in about 1200, regularized interactions with Muslims. Rulers like Sundiata more systematically utilized Muslim bureaucrats and converted to Islam as a gesture of goodwill toward the North African trading partners. A king of Mali, Mansa Musa, made a famous pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324, dazzling Arabs with his lavish supply of gold. Mansa Musa also organized a center of Muslim scholarship in the city of Timbuktu, and Muslim architecture spread widely. This remained, however, a compromise contact. There was little effort to convert ordinary people, though Sufi mis-

sionaries fanned out in the common pattern, with gradual results; their efforts were limited by the lack of towns south of the Sudanic kingdoms and by disease. In the Sudanic region itself, kings continued to portray themselves as divine, in the West African tradition, despite the contradictions with Islamic faith. And even among the Muslim elite, customs such as giving a relatively prominent place to women persisted, which profoundly shocked Arab visitors, who were otherwise impressed with the culture and political organization they saw around them. Islamic punishments, such as cutting off the hands of thieves, were also rejected as too brutal.

A second strand of Islam stretched down the East African coast, propelled by Arab traders in the Indian ocean. From Egypt, traders and missionaries worked directly southward, in the nation now known as the Sudan (different from the Sudanic kingdoms); beginning with the elite, widespread conversions occurred. Farther south, Swahili merchants—the word in Arabic means “coasters,” or people who work along the coasts—established a lively commerce between Indian ocean ports and interior villages. In the process they also brought Arabic language and Muslim religion and political ideas. Many traders intermarried with the African elite, as Islam began to provide cultural unity for upper classes all along the


coast. Conversions were voluntary, but Islam represented high social status and the kind of generalized religion useful to far-flung trade—a religion that local African cultures did not provide. Mosques and other literary and artistic expressions of Islam followed the shift in beliefs, and a mixed Arabic-African language, Swahili, emerged as well, ultimately providing a system of writing as well as facilitating oral communication. The intrusion of Portuguese power in this region in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries limited further growth, but when Portugal was expelled shortly before 1700 conversions resumed along the trade routes inland.

## Central Asia

Central Asia was a vast territory of largely nomadic, herding peoples. It had produced a number of waves of invaders, from the Indo-Europeans to the Huns and Turks, that had affected a variety of regions. Central Asians had also made use of iron and produced key inventions, such as the stirrup, that in turn affected other societies. Buddhism had won some converts, but the area as a whole had remained remote, untouched by many of the currents of the surrounding civilizations.

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## ***Extent of the Islamic World in Southeast Asia by 1500 CE***

 *Lands where Islam was spread by Sufi missionaries and traders*

 *Trade routes*

Islam was the first outside religion to penetrate the region in a systematic fashion, beginning in the eighth century. Most of the region is Muslim today, including the republics that recently broke away from the Soviet Union. The spread of Islam in central Asia involved both of the dominant patterns of Muslim contact: force and persuasion. Arab conquest pressed into Iran and Azerbaijan in the seventh century, and further conquests occurred in Transoxiana, the most settled part of the region, during the eighth century. But there the conquest stopped, and raids between Arabs and Turks ensued. In the ninth century, Muslim traders and then Sufi missionaries began to move out from scattered towns to the nomadic steppes, spreading Islam among the tribal groups. Turkish migrations from central Asia into the Middle East, beginning in the tenth century, further introduced Turks to Islam.

A final stage occurred during the Mongol invasions of central Asia and the Middle East in the thirteenth century. The Mongols were not Muslim, but their conquests brought new contacts between central Asia and the Middle East that in turn completed the conversion of the territory to Islam. In east central Asia, Muslim traders and Sufis made further contacts and conversions, bringing Islam to parts of present-day China such as East Turkmenistan.

As is common with intercultural contact, Islam did not totally alter the established cultures, which continued distinctive forms of art and music, a devotion to imaginative horsemanship, and a relatively high status for women. But conversion did bring change. A key question at the end of the twentieth century involves what kind of Islamic future this region, now free again, will decide to establish.

### **India**

When Islam expanded in the Middle East and central Asia, India was dominated by the older religion of Hinduism. The two faiths differed greatly, as Muslims insisted on subjection to a single god and Hindus believed in a host of specific divinities. Rituals and social beliefs also conflicted. Not surprisingly, initial trading contacts and even successful Arab raids on Indian territory had little cultural impact. A few pockets of Muslims developed, but as small minorities. Hindus largely tolerated these groups. Changes in Hinduism, including more emotional rituals and use of popular languages rather than the scholarly Sanskrit, bolstered this religion's position.

As is common when two major cultures encounter each other, influences moved in both directions. Muslims learned about Indian





science and mathematics, including the numbering system that passed to the Middle East (where it was later learned by Europeans who erroneously called the numerals “Arabic”).

The situation changed in the eleventh century, with wider and more durable Muslim conquests in India (spearheaded by Turkish, not Arab, peoples). Turkish conquerors established a large, loosely organized state, the Delhi sultanate, and attacked many Hindu temples and shrines. The stage was set for wider confrontation and contact. Conversions to Islam were encouraged by the presence of a Muslim ruling class, but devout Sufi also poured in, hoping to convert the infidels and winning followers by personal example and merit. Muslim religious leaders also adapted to the cultural setting, using Hindu stories but with Muslim characters and building shrines on the sites of Hindu temples and thus appropriating existing sacred territory. Islam specifically attracted warriors and also people from the lowest castes, drawn by the promise of spiritual equality rather than the Hindu ideas of successive reincarnations. At the same time, a syncretic movement arose within Hinduism, the *bhatki* cult, that accepted monotheism and spiritual equality—which helped keep some of the lower castes away from Islam proper. Later, in the sixteenth century, when another Muslim empire

formed, other Hindu groups developed a new religion from a mixture of Hindu and Muslim principles, notably the Sikhs, who kept many Hindu beliefs but added greater militance.

Overall, however, the main impact of Islam on India was the creation of an important religious minority, in the northwest—closest to the Islamic heartland—but also in the northeast. Most Indians remained satisfied with their own religious culture, and there was no massive immigration of Muslims from other areas. Suspicion of Hindus by Muslim rulers such as those of the Delhi sultanate—who objected to Hindu sensuality and representations of women, which one Muslim writer claimed showed an “essential foulness” in the religion—actually increased loyalty to Hinduism in opposition. Hindu rebellions against Muslim rule, sometimes led by converts to Islam who then changed their minds, also occurred. The difficult relationship between Hinduism and Islam in India—sometimes exhibiting mutual tolerance, sometimes great hostility—continued into modern times, when it was exploited by British colonial rulers, and into the later twentieth century, when it generated tensions between Muslim Pakistan and predominantly Hindu India.

## Southeast Asia

This was the last major region affected by Islam, which was introduced during the late fourteenth century. Muslim trading ships from Arabia and particularly from India brought both Muslim merchants and Sufis to the Malay peninsula and the islands that now form Indonesia. Merchants established crucial contacts in the coastal towns, where they influenced the ruling classes. By the fifteenth century, most elites in these cities had been converted. From the coastal towns, Sufis traveled inland, setting up schools and preaching in each village. Islam appealed to inland peoples as a way of integrating with the coastal populations, in a period of expanding trade. By the sixteenth century Islam had become a dominant religion in the Indonesian islands, save for pockets of Hinduism and for isolated, polytheistic peoples in remote parts of the interior. It had won powerful influence on the Malay peninsula and in the southern part of the Philippines. Its spread was stopped only by the arrival of European naval and commercial superiority during the sixteenth century. Even so, it was not pushed back; Indonesia is the largest Muslim nation in the world today.

Islam in southeast Asia inevitably merged with regional cultural influences, including

popular costumes, dances, and festivals—including brilliant shadow plays and other pre-Islamic staples based on Hindu epics. The Sufis tolerated large remnants of animist, Hindu, and Buddhist beliefs and rituals—many of which orthodox scholars would have found contrary to Islamic doctrine. Social relations were governed by pre-Islamic law, and religious law was applied to very specific types of exchanges. Women retained a stronger position than in the Islamic Middle East, often participating actively in market activities. Islam added, in sum, to the mixed, creative culture that predominated in southeast Asia.

## Suggested Readings

Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (New York, 1988); Francis Robinson, ed., *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the Islamic World* (New York, 1996). On special areas: Rene Bravmann, *African Islam* (Washington, D.C., 1983); K. N. Chaudhuri, *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilization of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (New York, 1990); Avril Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India* (Richmond, Surrey, Eng., 1993); Denis Sinor, ed., *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia* (New York, 1990).